Hobart-History

Mayor vs. School Board highlight of 1935

By Deborah L. Solivais

Violence marked the beginning of the new year for Hobart in 1935. On the first day of January, the body of Henry Nolte, a Ross Township dairy farmer, was found at his home three miles southeast of Hobart. The 14-year-old boy who discovered Nolte ran to a neighbor's house for help, and Hobart's police chief, Fred Rose, called in Lake County Sheriff Carroll Holley to assist with an investigation into the fatal shooting. The year was off to a grim start.

While Police Chief Rose was busy at the murder scene, a quiet ceremony was taking place at city hall chambers. Former mayor Owen J. Roper was turning over the reins of city government to Hobart's newly elected mayor, Frank H. Davis.

At noon, Jan. 1, 1935, City Clerk Laura R. Bracken administered the oath of office to Mayor Davis and four appointees to city council. Hobart's new councilmen were Fred Rose Jr., John Jones, Ralph F. Rhoades and Fred Ruchti. Councilman Ferguson had already been inducted.

On January 5, Chief Rose arrested Richard Chapman, a 22-year-old farm hand, for the murder of Henry Nolte. Chapman confessed to ransacking Nolte's empty house and waiting for Nolte to return home. He admitted to shooting the farmer twice as Nolte entered the house. The spoils of Chapman's crime consisted of $8.30 and a four-year-old automobile.

Chapman was found guilty of murder and robbery in February and was sentenced to be executed. In spite of several reprieves and stays of execution, Chapman's sentence was eventually carried out.

A census completed in February 1935 showed a slight increase in population over the 1930 survey. Hobart's population had risen to 5,893. A survey of all wards showed the existence of 1,540 structures with family units in Hobart. Of those structures, 300 did not have gas, 71 had no electricity, 380 were without running water, and 466 contained no bath tubs or showers.

The month of April brought welcome concessions from Hobart Light and Water Co. In response to public demand, officials announced a reduction in electric rates which would save residents an estimated $9,847 annually. This brought electric rates into line with those charged by NIPSCO, the utility company serving territory adjacent to Hobart.

With electric rates down, residents could take advantage of bargains offered elsewhere. Leslie Storey, owner of the Nickel Plate Garage at 426 Main St., was advertising the 1935 Terraplane, a 5-passenger, 2-door sedan with an all steel body, for only $698. And Isakson Bros., not to be out-done, was promoting a Plymouth at the low, low price of $510.

While comparing prices of cars at the Nickel Plate Garage, shoppers could also take a look at the new Kelvinator refrigerator, selling for a mere $99. And grocery stores were offering super sales on items to stock those refrigerators. Eight O'Clock Coffee was going for 19 cents per pound. Home-killed beef roast could be had for 12-½ cents per pound. And three pounds of hamburger sold for 25 cents.

By today's standards, prices in 1935 seem cheap, but laborers employed by Hobart's street deparment may have had a hard time saving enough out of their 50-cent hourly wage to purchase anything but the essentials.

While Fred Rose quietly accepted the mayor's appointment of Night Patrolman Frank Traeger to chief of police in April (leaving former Police Chief Rose in charge of Hobart's Fire Department) Guy Dickey, superintendent of schools, didn't step down without a fight.

Headlines in the April 25 issue of the Hobart Gazette told the story: "First on Wednesday Evening the Mayor "Fires" the School Board, Then the Board in Turn "Fires" Supt. Dickey--The Mayor Then Appoints Another School Board".

The disagreement between the superintendent and the school board dated back a few years, but the first round took place in 1934, when the school board tried to dismiss the superintendent. A student strike and a mass meeting of citizens caused the board to resign. Another board was appointed. In 1935, the school board again announced its intention to dismiss Dickey.

Mayor Davis fired all members of the school board and appointed three new members to replace them. Herman Pflughoeft, Joseph M. Mundell, and Gilbert Robinson were selected to take the place of Ross F. Trester, Dan Kraft Jr. and Herman Johnson.

But the fight didn't end there. Members of the old board refused to acknowledge their dismissal and continued to meet. On May 14, members of the new board filed suit in Lake Superior Court, asking the court to give them possession of the office of the board of school trustees. Citizens organized card parties to pay the new board's legal fees.

This is Main Street in Hobart circa 1935. Photo courtesy of Hobart Historical Society.

On May 30, a "music automobile" was driven around the city to announce a meeting of the old board. Chief of Police Traeger called in six deputies from the State Police to control the crowd of 500-600 citizens who attended the meeting. After a 10-minute session, Traeger and the deputies were called to escort Trester and Johnson from the building where they were reportedly being held against their wishes by the crowd.

In June, Judge Homer E. Sackett ruled in favor of the old school board, saying the Mayor had no legal right to appoint school boards and ruling that school trustees could only be appointed by the common council.

Guy Dickey's ouster became official. And on June 27, John Milton Sellers was elected as Dickey's successor.

The fight ended, with no explanation for the animosity between Dickey and the school board being offered in the newspapers.

Meanwhile, classes continued uninterrupted. Sixty-two seniors received diplomas at Roosevest Gymnasium during the 45th annual commencement ceremonies.

On July 11, the Hobart Gazette celebrated the publication of its 47th volume, making it the "oldest Democratic newspaper in Lake County and the oldest newspaper published in the Great Calumet Region,"

Two months later one of Hobart's oldest building, erected in 1860 when Hobart was still a trading post, was razed to make room for a new post office. The Joseph Black building, named after Hobart's first postmaster, and later commonly known as the Killigrew property, was torn down in the name of progress.

Without the occurrence of any more headline-making events, the year that began with a shotgun bang went out with a quiet whimper.

Hobart House

This is a 1910 picture of the Hobart House, a hotel. Photo courtesy of the Hobart Historical Society.